

Anthony Bannon at work on one of his own projects.



The Electronic Canvas

by Anthony Bannon

Television is a wonder in the disguise of furniture.

Its significance is as vast as the Solar System; its lenses capture, yet as intimate as falling asleep to the light of the twinkling tube.

We may not think much about television because it is a habit. Its presence is normal. The percentage of homes in which it lives is about the same as the number which measures normal body temperature.

But television also offers a whole new ball game for artistic, as well as social and entertainment, possibilities. One of the possibilities involves "live time." The other involves electrons.

The possibility of an art existing in "live time" — in fact that phrase itself — is a consideration invented in our lifetime. It has been said that jazz is a 20th Century art form. But jazz is a category of music, which already existed. Film has been said to be a 20th Century art form. But film may be considered a moving picture variation on still photography. Television, on the other hand, is electronic, like nothing else except radio. Unlike radio, however, it

offers image as well as sound, and it offers the combination back to the artist as soon as he makes it. Never before has an artist had the opportunity to see himself using his body as an image source in the same instant he makes the offering. The situation is equivalent to having a mirrored canvas which retains an image.

Television, in fact, has been called an electronic canvas. Here is a demonstration:

Your television is on the UHF band. Slowly turn the selection knob past the station you have been watching. The picture becomes grainy, gradually breaking up into tiny beads of snow, until finally, the snow will have won over picture.

This is how it should be, for this is television on its own terms. Each grain of snow is the result of an electron shot from a "gun," called a cathode ray tube, inside the set.

Now imagine what would happen if you could reach inside the set, grab one of these electrons and assign it to a specific point on the screen, then take another one and tell it to go to some other place, take another one and throw it away, take

a few more and punch them around a bit to reduce their power before assigning them their location, and so on. If your hand was fast enough to do this 30 times a second for each of the 525 lines of electrons which course across the screen, you would be making your own program of pictures. Without a camera.

Absurd?

Not at all.

This is a new wave of television, called video synthesis. Huge, complex electronic circuitries are required for a marksman artist to direct the pattern, flow and amplitude of the electrons. Experimentation with this equipment is only in an infant stage — primarily at WNET New York's Experimental Television Center, at WGBH Boston's laboratory and KQED San Francisco's National Center for Experiments in Television. Nonetheless, exciting work has been done.

"Video is like food," remarks Stephen Beck, who, at KQED made the Beck Synthesizer. "There are the basic ingredients and a wide open way for mixing the different elements."

And Scott Bartlett, a West Coast film and video maker: "There's a whole new story to be told. We must now find out what we have to say because of our new techniques."

The images made with video synthesizers often do not represent anything "real." They are not pictures of chairs, or trees, or people, as such. Instead, the images come closer to looking like the wonderful bursts of color and shapes that can be made by pressing one's closed eyes: Visual material from the mind's eye and eye's mind. And sometimes, more exciting yet, they look like pictures never seen before.

Therefore, the images of video synthesis do not "mean" in the traditional way of "meaning" — easy, dramatic packages with words to lead the way. But they do "mean" in a non-verbal way, a way closer to one's interior or, if you will excuse the pretension, spiritual experience.

Probably closer to home than a story that involves people and events outside our immediate experience,

the work of video synthesis simply uses a new, or depending upon how one looks at it, a very old, language.

To some, however, the images of video synthesis are off-putting, alienating. Critic Gene Youngblood, in his book, "Expanded Cinema," responds to that charge:

"... There is nothing inherent in this material which is alienating. There is no material an artist uses today that is not available to others for other uses. (Such as using video synthesizers for razzle-dazzle videographic advertising.) What makes his (the artist's) use of the material different from others' uses is his attitude toward it." Electrons, Youngblood reminds, "are nothing more than a new material" for the artists. "They move in finite ways."

And he adds: "Television like the computer is a sleeping giant. . . . But those who are beginning to use it in revolutionary ways are very much awake . . . Television will help us become more human. It will lead us closer to ourselves."

Indeed, the possibilities of television are immense. Television can also look at itself in live time.

Look at itself? 1984?

No, not futurism, just another way to make pretty pictures, pictures that might have new meaning.

Place a camera in front of a monitor and connect the two in a way similar to the connection of camera and monitor at drive-in bank teller's window. What the monitor will show is a camera taking a picture of a monitor, which endlessly doubles back on itself into a hall of mirrors. If the cameraman focuses a little tighter, a visual event comparable to audio feedback will occur — pulsing forms of a mandala, life-like moving blobs of light or other fascinating patterns and movement of shapes and light. Canadian critic Robert Arn calls this video feedback "perhaps the purest line of video art."

Through feedback, other video strengths may be combined, mixing in a feedback loop images transformed by a variety of means,

including waveform generators, film or slide images, or by interrupting the camera-monitor line with other images. Additionally, color may be added to the image once it has been completed — a kind of electronic brushwork.

Thus, one may begin to see the possibilities for video image-making are multiple, so large, in fact, that often is necessary to control the complex variables.

Television art is a new challenge, and it has very little to do with what one usually sees on the set. Says Paul Kaufman, director of the National Center for Experiments in Television: "We live in a world we cannot imagine. Television ought to make it possible to imagine again."

Anthony Bannon, in addition to his job as lively arts critic for the Buffalo Evening News, is also a video and filmmaker. He has co-produced an experimental program with filmmaker Ed Emshwiller called "Positive Negative: Electronic Faces" and filmed an experimental documentary "U.B.: More to Come," both aired on Channel 17.



Experimental filmmaker and inventor Stephen Beck.